

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Second Sunday of Advent: Year C

RCL Readings – Malachi 3:1-4 or Baruch 5:1-9; Luke 1:68-79 (Canticle 16); Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6

ACNA Readings – Malachi 3:1-5; Psalm 126; 1 Corinthians 4:1-21; Luke 3:1-6

Seasonal Introduction. Advent is the start of a new liturgical year in the Christian calendar. The season doesn't start with the birth of the Messiah but rather with the expectation that God will fulfill His promises. Advent isn't just about the first coming of Jesus as God incarnate on earth but also His promise to return. As Christmas approaches, we can be assured that just as God fulfilled His promises to Israel through Jesus, the Messiah, He will also fulfill His promise to return and judge the living and the dead—some to everlasting life and some to shame and everlasting contempt.

Common Theme. The first week of Advent led us to contemplate the coming judgment. This week, the second of Advent, we prepare for the coming of the Lord in a very practical way—repentance. From these passages we learn that prophecy leads to repentance and repentance should lead to purity. When we meet the Lord we should do so with clean hands and a pure heart.

Hebraic Context. The Hebrew Scriptures provide clear instructions on various forms of washing and immersion. The washing that God dictated functioned as part of the ritual process of purity through which someone in the community moved from a state of uncleanness to being pure.¹ While some of the methods and reasons were provided, as well as consequences for disobedience, not every detail was recorded in the Torah. Traditions developed that became common understanding of ritual immersion, such as the use of living rather than stagnant water.²

John the Baptist followed this tradition of using living water (the Jordan river). The instructions of baptism in the early church also preferred living water, although if no such water was available, Baptism would not be prevented using less preferred methods.³

While the primary Biblical reasons for immersion were physical purity (such as following childbirth, bodily discharges, and skin disease) it was also acknowledged that some impurities were caused by

¹ For instance, The bronze laver was used by the priests before they entered the tabernacle or offered offerings on the altar. They were to wash their hands and feet or they would be struck down by God. (Exodus 30:17-21) The leper was to wash themselves twice in order to reenter society, once after the priest declared them clean and then again after seven days. (Leviticus 14:1-9) Those who touched the dead were to cleanse themselves after three days and again after seven days. Additionally, the dwelling place would also be cleansed by sprinkling. If they do not ritually cleanse themselves, that person would no longer be part of the community. (Numbers 19:11-22)

² The 6th tractate of the Mishnah is called *Mikva'ot*, or immersion baths, and consists of 10 chapters discussing ritual purity immersion.

³ Didache 7 "Baptize into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy spirit in living water. But if you have not living water, baptize into other water; and if you can not in cold, in warm. But if you have not either, pour out water thrice upon the head into the name of Father and Son and Holy Spirit."

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sin.⁴ The Dead Sea community at Qumran⁵ were famous for their meticulous adherence to ritual immersion, but they knew they had to do so for more than just ritual impurity. The Thanksgiving Hymn (1QH 9.31-33),⁶ which was prayed during daily ritual immersion, says “You have cleansed it from the abundance of iniquity.” indicating a belief that baptism both by water and spirit was part of the process of repentance. Further, the Dead Sea Sect had a community rule that described the right to perform the ritual washing only came after repentance. It explained regarding a man who had transgressed, that he “shall not enter the water to partake of the pure Meal of the men of holiness, for they shall not be cleansed unless they turn from their wickedness.”⁷

John's baptism certainly looks quite different from the ritual cleansings in the Torah, or, in fact, all other known forms of immersion for physical purity alone—John's focus is solely on repentance. However, through what we learn from Qumran, in the 2nd Temple period, water immersions were part of the process of preparation regarding both repentance and purity. Those who came to John's baptism of repentance did not do so by accident. It took effort and time to travel to the Judean desert and the Jordan river, the area where John preached and required the preparation of repentance for those to be baptized.

Later, when it came to the baptism in the early church, the Didache didn't simply state how someone should be baptized. It also detailed the preparation that went into the ritual. The baptism candidate had to choose between following God, loving Him with all their hearts and their neighbour as themselves and following the way of death, “loving vanities,... not pitying a poor man, not labouring for the afflicted, not knowing Him that made them.”⁸ After this, the one to be baptized (and the one to baptize) would fast before God prior to the actual baptism.

Formal ritual that lacks any inner spiritual reality is the basis for religious hypocrisy. The prophets spoke out against such hypocrisy, “this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me.” Moses declared that we should write the Torah on our hearts, from which a true love towards God should spring forth. The call of the prophets was to return to that place where the people of God love the Lord with all their hearts. This is the very context in which John preached a

⁴ For instance, Miriam, in Numbers 12:10, became leprous when God was angered by her and Aaron's dispute against Moses.

⁵ During the late 2nd century BC a religious community left Jerusalem, unhappy with the corruption they saw under the Hasmonean and Temple leadership and continued until the destruction of Jerusalem. They are most famous today for the discovery of thousands of preserved scrolls in the deserts surrounding Qumran, including portions from every book of the Hebrew Scriptures except Esther. However, they also wrote their own scrolls which, among other things, detailed their strict code for communal living.

⁶ One of the many scrolls found near Qumran, classified as 1QH, was a contemporary hymn written by the Qumran community similar to the Psalms of the Scriptures. It has been named the Thanksgiving Hymn as its refrain was one of great thanks.

⁷ Community Rule 5.13-14. Another scroll found near Qumran, designated 1QS (The Community Rule), wrote out what the ideals of the community should be, who made up the community (and who did not make up the community), and the rules that would govern the community.

⁸ Didache 5

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message of baptism contingent on repentance. The prophetic call of such a repentance is one to shake us from complacency and engage fully in our walk of faith in a manner both purified and holy.

Malachi 3:1-4.⁹ In the previous chapter of Malachi, God rebukes the unfaithful people of Judah—particularly the priesthood. Following His rebuke, God would be justified in immediate judgment. Instead of judgment, Malachi declares that God will send a messenger.¹⁰ This messenger would prepare the way for the Lord to appear suddenly in His temple where He was to dwell once more.

However, the Lord would not be the only one who would appear. We can understand from the passage that another messenger would come—the messenger of the covenant (מְלַאךְ הַבְּרִית, *malach ha'brit*).¹¹ The advent of the Lord is a desired event, but similar to the many prophecies regarding the Day of the LORD, Malachi warns the people about the day the messenger of the covenant would come: “Who can endure the day of His coming, and who can stand when He appears?”

Without a doubt, it is a wonderful thing to long for the presence of the Lord, however we must understand that clean hands and a pure heart are required to stand before Him. The arrival of this second messenger involves a process of refining and cleansing in order to prepare us for the Lord's presence. Malachi 3:2 uses a rare Hebrew word בְּרִית (*borit*), translated as soap.¹² This word shares the same consonants as the word for covenant (בְּרִית, *brit*). Upon a close reading, we see how Malachi links these concepts of covenant and cleansing. Psalm 50:16 gives us another insight into this association stating of the wicked, “What right have you to recite my statutes or take my covenant on your lips?”

The refining and cleansing that Malachi speaks of begins with the household of faith, particularly the Levites (who were chastised only a short time before in chapter 2). The Levites were a tribe who should have already been messengers of the Lord to Israel.¹³ Malachai warns that the refining fire will not be

⁹ ACNA reading includes Malachi 3:5

¹⁰ The word for messenger is מְלַאךְ (*malach*), the same word used for angel and the name of the prophet who delivered the prophecies in this book, Malachi.

¹¹ What covenant was this the messenger, or angel, of? Some commentaries have jumped to the New Covenant spoken of in Jeremiah 31 as Malachi 3 is seen as prophetic. However, the covenant is described as something the people delighted in and the New Covenant was not, yet, given to the people of Israel. It seems more likely that the covenant spoken of was one which the people were proud of, likely the one received at Mount Sinai. Stephen, in Acts 7:53, referred to a common Jewish understanding that the law was delivered by a messenger, or angels.

¹² Jeremiah 2:22 is the only other place this word, *borit*, is used in the Bible and mentions another substance that was used for cleaning—possibly some form of potash. In ancient Israel, soap was sometimes made from potash or alkaline salts sourced from the Dead Sea, located southeast of Jerusalem in the wilderness. Interestingly, Isaiah 40 indicates that the wilderness is where the messenger will appear.

¹³ Malachi 2:7 states, “The lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts.” The Levites were supposed to be the teachers of the law to Israel (Deuteronomy 33:10). One of the ways they did so was through declaring and singing the Psalms at the Temple but they were also to go throughout Israel and teach.

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pleasant for the sons of Levi but, by the end, “they will bring offerings in righteousness” that will please God—an inversion of the curse and rebuke God had brought against them in chapter 2.¹⁴

One of the main tasks of a prophet was to warn communities with whom God was displeased. Often, these were people who were under a false impression that they were following the Torah, the guidance of God who thus should have been delighted in their righteous and holy living. However, they were not following the entirety of the Torah and chose which portions they would follow, falling well short of the life God called them to live. This irony should make us all ask whether we are deceiving ourselves by doing the things we believe God desires when He requires an obedience that is fuller and truer to His desires. The Levites would have understood the words of the covenants—the doctrines, theologies, and even practical applications of those doctrines. But upon the return of the Lord, He won't ask if we understood the theologies; He'll judge us on whether we have pure and undefiled religion—such as not oppressing the worker in their wages and visiting the orphan and the widow in their affliction.¹⁵

Baruch 5:1-9. In Jeremiah 36:4, it states that Baruch ben Neriah was the Scribe of the prophet Jeremiah.¹⁶ However, while Baruch ben Neriah may have inscribed Jeremiah's prophecies for him, the book of Baruch was not the scroll written by Baruch. Saint Jerome argued that the book of Baruch should not be a part of the book of Jeremiah as it was not read nor held as canon by the Hebrews. So why is Baruch included in the Lectionary and Daily Office readings this week?

Despite not being canon in either the Jewish or Church scriptures, Baruch is still part of the Apocrypha.¹⁷ It was included in the Septuagint and quoted by several of the Church fathers, such as Irenaeus in *Against Heresies*, 5.35.1.¹⁸ We do not use the Apocrypha to establish church doctrine but these books can be good for example of life and instruction.

The prophets of God constantly warned Israel and Judah of the coming judgment if they continued to walk in their own ways rather than God's and they often saw the judgment of God with their own eyes after their warnings were ignored. While Baruch was known as the Scribe of Jeremiah, in chapter 5 he seems to take inspiration from another prophet, Isaiah. Interspersed throughout the many warnings of Isaiah there were moments of great promise testifying to a coming day where God would restore Israel and Jerusalem.

¹⁴ Jeremiah 33:18 states, “and the Levitical priests shall never lack a man in my presence to offer burnt offerings, to burn grain offerings, and to make sacrifices forever” in the same statement as when Jeremiah declared “David shall never lack a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel.”

¹⁵ Jesus will judge all the nations (Matthew 25:33-46. He will judge on whether they act in practical ways with righteousness and justice (such as giving a cup of water to the thirsty).

¹⁶ A clay bulla was excavated in 1975 of a Baruch ben Neriah—this bulla can be seen in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem.

¹⁷ Apocrypha means “hidden” or “obscure”, which is odd as the various books in the Apocrypha were well known and read by both the Jewish audience they were written for and the early church.

¹⁸ Although Irenaeus claimed it to be from Jeremiah as Baruch was Jeremiah's scribe.

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Like a redeemed widow, Baruch declares that Jerusalem would put away her garments of mourning and put on the beauty of the glory from God.¹⁹ Additionally, the headdress that was removed from the priest, with all other finery on the Day of the LORD, would be returned.²⁰ Baruch, like Jeremiah, would have seen the devastation of God's judgment but Baruch 5:6 states that while "they went out from you on foot, led away by their enemies... God will bring them back to you, carried in glory, as if on a royal throne."²¹ The exiles had themselves been led away by their enemies into Babylon—their own iniquity had brought about the captivity. Baruch prophesies that it would be the Lord who restores them in His mercy and righteousness—the redemptive process here is attributed solely to God.²²

Baruch concludes with a reminder of the power and divine work of God as He returned the people to Jerusalem. "For God has ordered that every high mountain and the everlasting hills be made low, and the valleys filled up to make level ground, so that Israel may walk safely in the glory of God."²³ With the work of God comes peace, joy, mercy, and righteousness. Even in his darkest hour, Baruch returned to the promises of God in Isaiah and knew that God would fulfill His promises. While we may not have the same promises as were given to Jerusalem and the people of Israel in Baruch and Isaiah, God has likewise given us promises that can sustain us in our darkest days.

Luke 1:68-79 (Canticle 16).²⁴ In Latin, Canticle 16 is called the *Benedictus* as it begins in the traditional Jewish fashion of blessing the Lord, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel". Zechariah, filled with the Holy Spirit, was the father of John the Baptist but began his prophecy with a focus on the unborn Jesus, the fulfillment of God's promises. Only after this did he prophesy about his own child, John.

¹⁹ Isaiah 51:17-20 along with Isaiah 52:1-3 read as a widow who lost everything before she is redeemed by God. This redemption would not be through money—the redemption would be through the Servant of God spoken of in Isaiah 52:13-53:12.

²⁰ In Isaiah 61:3, 10, and in Ezekiel 24 the headdress is closely related to mourning and rejoicing—it seems like there was a custom to not wear the beautiful headdress when weeping and mourning. But the word is largely defined in Exodus 39:28 (echoed in Ezekiel 44:18). The priests were to wear a (פארי המגבעת) headdress turban (scholars can only speculate what the headdress or the turban looked like or even if they are different head coverings or the same head covering). On the turban of the high priest was the declaration Holy to the LORD. Where does our beauty and joy come from if not from our service to a holy God as God's holy people—and His service to us?

²¹ See also Isaiah 43:4-7

²² The children would return by the word of the Holy One, *קְרָמָתוֹ טוֹב אֱלֹהִים*. In 40 of the 42 uses of *אֱלֹהִים*, the New Testament specifically refers to God in the person of the Holy Spirit. In I John 2:20, one of the two remaining uses, it also seems to refer to God (likely still in the person of the Holy Spirit).

²³ See also Isaiah 49:8-12 and 40:4-5

²⁴ Instead of reading from a Psalm, the songbook of the Scriptures, a canticle (liturgical hymn) from the song of Zechariah is read. Often recited during morning or evening prayers, canticles are beautiful songs that have been read, prayed, and sung for thousands of years to remember God's deeds. Whether it is the Song of Miriam, sung to children to remind them of the power and redemptive arm of God; the Song of Hannah, a prayer of thanksgiving and sure knowledge of God's resurrection, which may have encouraged the martyrs during the great tribulation of the people under Antiochus Epiphanes; or the song of Mary, praising God for the fulfillment of His promises and restoration of the lowly.

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As a righteous priest, Zechariah clearly understood Scripture and used it throughout his prophetic declaration. The text is dense with references to Scripture and to God's many promises. Even a hundred pages of exegesis would only scratch the surface of the histories and narratives Zechariah references. While knowing the promises of God is vital, it is equally important to praise the God who made those promises. We must recognize that He is faithful to fulfill them, and in fact, many of His promises have already been fulfilled. And, finally, we must participate in fulfilling the promises of God that He has called us to, as Zechariah charged John to do.

As a canticle, Luke 1:68-79 isn't just a splendid theological work of art, it is a way for the church to declare its beliefs: we are saved from our enemies, God's mercy has been shown on us, we are truly free to worship God through our service without fear, and God has granted forgiveness for our sins. We who sat in darkness and in the shadow of death can now walk in the way of peace.

Philippians 1:3-11. God did not create us to work alone. During the creation story on day six, God looked at what He had made and declared that it was good. However, it stands to reason it was not yet perfect, for God said "it is not good that the man should be alone." People were meant to be in fellowship with both God and our fellow man. Whether through loneliness, pride, or working without oversight the spread of the gospel is often diminished where there is no community of believers working together.

Paul writes to the community at Philippi and tells them he prays with joy when he remembers them. The community of Philippi were his brothers and sisters in Christ, people with whom he had built a personal relationship and with whom he now partnered with in the sharing of the gospel. Not only could Paul see God at work in their community but they were his joy and crown. Because of the Philippians, Paul knew he was not alone and that there were many who prayed for him and cared for his well being.

Paul spoke to the Philippians from a prison. The good news of God's victory over Satan and death is sure but there is always work that needs to be done. Satan will still battle against those whom God has called. As we examine this season of repentance, Paul encourages his brothers and sisters to continue following God so that, when He returns, they will be blameless and complete. And, as the day of judgment and the resurrection draw near,²⁵ let us actively encourage one another in prayer, thanks, and action to work together and fight against Satan to advance the gospel.

²⁵ In his commentary on Philippians, Spurgeon stated that, "the second advent ought to be much more on our minds than the hour of our death." The followers of Jesus are not perfected in death, according to Spurgeon, but will only be wholly perfect at the Second Coming. "We may be perfect in death, doubtless, as to the moral and spiritual nature; but a man has a body as well as a soul, and it needs both parts to make the perfect man. While the worms are devouring the body the man is not yet perfect. He will be perfect as to his whole manhood when the Lord shall come, and the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible."

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Luke 3:1-6. Luke provides two important backdrops to the prophecy in Isaiah 40:3-5, which he quotes. First, Luke sets the context with the foreign rulers (Romans and Idumeans²⁶) as well as the priests in charge.²⁷ We know from extra-biblical accounts that the Jewish people of the time were not satisfied with these rulers. It was in this context that John went out into the wilderness to proclaim his message. It was this wilderness, where John was preaching, that is the second important backdrop to the prophecy in Isaiah 40.

Why was the wilderness so important in the advent of the Messiah? The answer can be found in Isaiah 40 itself, which is quoted in all four Gospels. Hebrew, unlike English, has no punctuation marks, such as commas. Therefore, in Isaiah 40, the text reads, "A voice cries: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord.'" The question is then: where do you prepare for the redeemer? The Jewish people took Isaiah 40 very literally and went out into the wilderness to prepare for the coming of the Messiah.²⁸

The wilderness was not a safe place in general, and on the surface, a place unfit to herald the coming of the redeemer. It was without law, filled with danger, bandits, and wild animals.²⁹ In Jewish tradition in the First Century, it was also seen as the abode of demons.³⁰ Yet it is precisely in such darkness that light shines the brightest. John was the voice calling the people to prepare, and his call carried an element of warning, both for the individual and for the nation. However, his call was not strictly against

²⁶ Tiberius Caesar was the Roman emperor from AD 14-37 and Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea from 26-36. While Herod the Great and his children, Herod and Philip, were technically considered to be Jewish, it was because of the forced conversion of Edomites (Idumeans) by the late Hasmoneans (Jewish) rulers. They were largely still considered to be interloping rulers.

²⁷ Annas and Caiaphas were not highly regarded as the High Priests of Israel. First, because the High Priest was supposed to be passed down from father to son when the current High Priest died. Instead, it was bought and sold (as was often traditional in the Roman world) and would change from year-to-year. The corruption of the High Priests of Israel was a well-known issue in the 1st Centuries, such that over 125 years prior to Jesus, a group of priests broke off from the temple in Jerusalem and went to the desert (such as Qumran) where they dedicated themselves to studying the Scriptures and preparing for the Messiah.

²⁸ The Qumran community physically left Jerusalem and the leadership they considered to be corrupt, and thus false, and prepared themselves for the coming of the Messiah in the wilderness. The wilderness wasn't the only place that the people waited for the Messiah. The temple also held great significance, as it was believed that the Messiah would suddenly appear there. As it is written in Malachi 3:1, "The Lord, whom you seek will suddenly come to His temple." In the same literal and physical manner, Anna and Simeon waited for the Messiah to visit them at the Temple.

²⁹ Reports of explorers travelling from Jerusalem to Jericho and vice-versa speak of death through sun stroke and dehydration. The wilderness has little food or water, except when flash floods roll through and kill hikers even to this day. David, when he was forced to live as a rebel, ran to the wilderness and the dead sea. Not everyone acted as righteously as David towards their neighbours, resulting in stories such as the Good Samaritan which, while a parable, may have been influenced by real stories of robbery along the desert roads. Isaiah 34:13-14 writes of a time when Jerusalem would be as desolate as the wilderness, complete with the wild animals that were so often terrifying when heard at night in the desert.

³⁰ For instance, Tobit 8:3 speaks of a demon fleeing to the deserts of Egypt, where he was then bound by Raphael.

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the foreign rulers or the corrupt priests. In order to prepare, it was the people who were to repent (not rebel) and live in a manner that exemplified their true repentance.

Jesus came to this earth as a redeemer for people in need of a redeemer. We must acknowledge the need for both personal and national repentance. Journeying through advent where we remember Jesus' first coming and prepare for His return, our preparation should follow the same pattern of repentance that John preached—hear the prophetic word of God's wrath towards our hypocrisy, repent, and bear fruit in keeping with repentance in holiness and purity. As we look towards Jesus' second coming this advent season, there is no better time for the Church to go out into those darkest of places, even where the demons abide, and be a voice that calling out for repentance.

Hebraic Perspective. The desert, a place of chaos and death, became associated with demons quite early in Jewish thought. Leviticus 16:10 speaks of the Yom Kippur scapegoat being sent into the wilderness to Azazel. Leviticus 17:7 spoke of goat demons that were quickly associated with this wilderness of Azazel. Jewish literature of the 2nd Temple period spoke of a demon, Azazel,³¹ that was bound and cast into the desert.³² Isaiah 13:21 and 34:14 both speak of creatures in deserted places that were also associated with demons in the 2nd Temple period.³³

But the wilderness was also a place where God had told Israel to prepare for the coming of the Lord. And so the wilderness became known as a battleground to go out and fight against Satan and all demons and announce the good news of God's victory—the gospel. Many early leaders of the church went to the desert to pray, prepare themselves to follow God, and fight against Satan. They became known as the Desert Fathers.³⁴ The Orthodox and Coptic churches continue to send monks to the desert to fast, pray, and battle against the forces of Satan to this day. These men and women are almost always ascetics—people of great spiritual discipline who abstain from the things of this world.

The Scriptures state that demons are real and are constantly fighting against us. This was self-evident to Jesus, as He encountered demons throughout His ministry. It was also self-evident to Paul, who was obstructed by Satan several times. It is also a reality that should be self-evident to us. How do we fight against Satan and all the spiritual forces that battle against us? There are many books titled along the lines of *103 Scriptures to Fight Demons* or *10 Aspects of Faith to Defeat Satan* but from study of scripture, there is one very simple and clear way to fight Satan.

³¹ Apocalypse of Abraham 2.1.4; I Enoch 6:13

³² I Enoch 10:4; Tobit 8.2

³³ Lilith, translated as night bird in the ESV, was understood to be a demon in several translations such as the Septuagint and Aramaic translations. In much later Jewish traditions, this presumed demon became the first wife of Adam according to the Alphabet of Sirach.

³⁴ Long before the Desert Fathers, many of God's leaders went to the desert to be prepared for their positions: Abraham, Moses, David, Paul, and even Jesus.

The Qumran community also went into the wilderness to fulfill God's commandment to prepare the way while in the wilderness while battling the forces of darkness.

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Humble yourself before the Lord—submit yourself to God.

Submitting ourselves to God is an incredibly active endeavour—we must cleanse our hands and purify our hearts; we must mourn, weep, and repent; and we must bear fruit in keeping with repentance. Those who went to the desert to become God's leader, those who went to the desert to prepare the way for Him, and those who went to the desert to pray all had one thing in common. They had to rely on God.

The battle that we are in is not easy, but we have the good news of God's victory. Satan has already been defeated by God. Even if we were to go to the stronghold of the enemy, such as the desert, if we come to God with repentance and humility we are joining an army that is already victorious.

ACNA Readings

Psalm 126.³⁵ The first verse seems to reflect back on the time when the Lord brought His people back from Babylon under Ezra and Nehemiah.³⁶ The expression “the LORD restored the fortunes” as seen in the opening verse, can refer to national fortunes, as it does in the context of this psalm, “When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion”, or Psalm 14:7, “When the LORD restored the fortunes of His people”. But the term can also be applied individually. For example, the same expression is used in the case of Job, where the Lord restored the fortunes of Job (Job 42:10).

Psalm 126 was part of a litany of Psalms, termed the Psalms of Ascent, that were chanted by pilgrims as they neared Jerusalem. In their journey they could rejoice that “the LORD has done great things for us.” In context, the nations that Israel were to be a light to declaring that “The LORD has done great things for them” is precisely opposite of what the nations said when Israel was taken into captivity.³⁷ So too would the restoration of Zion's fortune be precisely the opposite of their exile. There are times for weeping, even as there are times for repentance.³⁸ But God's mercy and restoration should bring great joy, for God is with His people. The parallel switch from “them” to “us” also allowed the worshipper, at

³⁵ Psalm 126 is one of the 15 psalms known as the Songs of Ascent. The tradition has become that these psalms form part of Jewish liturgy used during the three pilgrim festivals of the Lord. We can imagine that this psalm was on the lips of many pilgrims as they made their way towards Jerusalem at the time of Jesus.

³⁶ No author of Psalm 126 is mentioned, simply that it is a Psalm of Ascent. However, Ezra would have seen the people who returned to Jerusalem both rejoicing and weeping (Ezra 3:13, 10:1) and some scholars suggest he composed Psalm 126. The Levites in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah may have written some of the Psalms of Ascent, such as Psalm 126, for the dedication of the walls (Nehemiah 12:27-43).

³⁷ See Deuteronomy 29:18-38, as seen also in Jeremiah 22:8-9. God's interaction with Israel wasn't only for Israel to enjoy or bear—it always served as a visible testimony to the nations as well. Israel's history—their moments of waywardness, divine correction, and eventual restoration—reveals the character of God. Whether in times of discipline or restoration, the nations bear witness to the justice, forgiveness, and mercy inherent in God's dealings with His people.

³⁸ While weeping doesn't always lead to repentance, it may be hard to repent if there is no weeping.

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any point in history, to participate as one of those redeemed by God.³⁹ The worshiper chanting the psalm could proclaim himself as part of the sacred and redemptive arc of history in which God has been working. The past becomes, in some way, part of the present.

1 Corinthians 4:1-21. In his Epistles, Paul uses various terms to describe his role in relation to God and fellow believers. In Titus 1:1, he calls himself a *doulos*—a servant or slave of God—and an *apostolos*, an apostle of Jesus. In 1 Corinthians 4:1, however, he refers to himself as a *ὑπηρέτας* (*hyperetas*), a subordinate slave who assists or works for another, often another slave. Yet, in the same verse, Paul also calls himself an *οἰκονόμος* (*oikonomos*), a steward or manager of a household. While both roles involve servitude, they differ greatly in status: the steward, though still a servant, had authority and responsibilities over other slaves.

Paul was often judged, sometimes by the world and sometimes even by the church. Unlike the Corinthians, Paul is poor. While the Corinthians are wise, Paul is a fool. While the Corinthians are strong, Paul is weak. The Corinthians are held in high honour but Paul is held in disrepute. Paul is hungry, thirsty, and homeless, having to work each day to survive even as he was reviled, persecuted, and slandered—in total, “we have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things.”

And yet, Paul did not long to become like the Corinthians, actually stating that it was the Corinthians that should imitate him. Submission to God as a servant of the servants and, even harder, submission to God's stewards on earth may make us appear to be fools, but God commends us for our humility, not our pride.⁴⁰

³⁹ Psalm 126 made several grammatical changes throughout the song. While the remnant of Israel returned to Jerusalem weeping and rejoicing, it has been sung for over two-thousand years, many of whom weren't personally returning from exile. The grammatical change in Psalm 126:3-4 allowed all the worshippers who were going up to Jerusalem to rejoice as their forefathers rejoiced when they returned to Jerusalem after the exile. They were to rejoice in God's salvation as if God had redeemed them—even as God still redeems His people.

However, the psalms are also a great source for prophecy and many psalms are used as proof texts in the New Testament for the life, work and messiahship of Jesus. After the resurrection, Jesus appeared to His disciples, teaching them that everything was written about Him in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms... (Luke 24:44). This is particularly evident in the Epistle of Hebrews where the Psalms are quoted as a major source for the messiahship of Jesus.

Psalm 126 is written in the plural form except the last verse which switches the verbs to masculine singular. Grammatical changes, such as this, always elicited the question, “why?”. (Exodus 19:1-2 is an excellent illustration of a grammatical change that is picked up on by early Jewish scholars, including Luke in Acts 2:1)

Who was this person who would go out weeping but with seeds to sow? Who was it that would return with a full harvest accompanied with shouts of joy? Could it not be the Messiah? The one who died to save many?

⁴⁰ While we are all servants, God still requires us to submit to each other (Ephesians 5:21) as well as to our local authorities (Romans 13:1-7), and, of course, to God. God has placed a hierarchy in the church, shepherds and

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Paul's description of himself also speaks to our own calling. We are all servants of the Lord. In that way we are all equal, using the gifts, talents and abilities given to us by God for His glory and in His service. Paul writes that; "Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful." His description of his own ministry focuses on deprivation and humiliation. Something many of us would prefer to avoid in ministry. Often modern ministries are overly concerned with the image of success through the eyes of secular society. Paul reminds us that we are called into humble service.

bishops, teachers and servants to guide us, encourage us, and walk faithfully with one another in obedience to Him. It can be easy to adopt the rampant secular individualism that is so prevalent in the west, particularly when we are equal before God, but we do so with the peril of arrogance and a loss of the good things God has given us.